

# Need for Perspective: Introducing the Special Issue “Reflecting and Evaluating Game Studies”

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Frans Mäyrä & Olli Sotamaa  
University of Tampere

It has been over a decade since contemporary game studies was established as an academic field and scholarly community. 2001 was famously declared as the “Year One” when the journal *Game Studies* was launched, DiGRA was formed in 2003, and the journal *Games and Culture* had its inaugural issue in 2006. In that first issue, several scholars working in the field gave their answers to the question, “Why Game Studies Now?” -- emphasising the emergent and novel character of game studies at that point. After completing a full decade of games research, it is important to stop for a moment to reflect and evaluate what we have achieved in game studies, and the directions that research is taking. Numerous conferences have appeared in this field, new journals have been launched, dissertations are written, and in the process, the emergent discipline has gone through its fair share of transformations. This special issue is motivated by the need to understand the changing landscape of game studies, and the directions for its future.

One of the key challenges involved in any attempt at talking of game research or game studies in general, is that we are inevitably talking in plural. There are many different things game scholars do, when they do game studies. The “essence” of the field quickly proves elusive. Do we want to focus on game-specific research approaches and self-identified game scholars or do we count all games-related scholarly works as game research? Until recently, the notions on development, character and status of game research have been mostly based on personal accounts and anecdotal evidence. And even when scholars have worked towards producing research-based overviews of the research field, the results seem at least partly contradictory.

To take one example, the bibliometric, statistically conducted analysis by Melcer et al. (2015) indicates that games research can be grouped into a variety of different clusters of papers and venues and thereby several distinct research communities. While the study relies on over 8000 game research articles from 48 publication venues, it still fails to take into account for example the popular monographs or anthologies and thereby is biased towards particular disciplinary publication traditions favoured for example in technical and computer sciences. At the same time, the survey based study by Quandt et al. (2015) highlights how game scholars with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds still hold relatively homogeneous viewpoints on many central issues relevant to the field. These results are based on answers from almost 500 game scholars representing over 40 countries, but the sample is more tilted

towards social science oriented approaches, whereas more technically oriented game research remains underrepresented in this case. Both these studies show that even relatively large data sets have so far been able to provide only partial answers.

This special issue of *Games and Culture* cannot provide a comprehensive overview of this expanding, multi- and interdisciplinary research field, either. However, what this issue aims for is to engage in dialogue between different traditions and to stimulate reflective responses about the overall state of the field.

The selection of papers in this issue originates from the “Critical Evaluation of Game Studies” seminar, which took place in Tampere, Finland, in Spring 2014. This was the tenth annual international spring seminar for work-in-progress papers, organized by the Game Research Lab in the University of Tampere. During the intense two-day event, the participants presented altogether 18 paper papers exploring the past, present and future of game studies. The papers chosen as the basis of journal issue are all focused on historical, sociology of knowledge or otherwise meta-critical approaches to game studies as a discipline or research field, and when taken together, contribute to the better understanding of the character and evolution of game studies.

The first article, ‘The Game Definition Game: A Review’ by Jaakko Stenros, is based on mapping out and analysing over 60 definitions of games that have been published since the 1930s. The analysis is carried to detect both those issues that these definitions agree on, as well as on highlighting the fundamental differences in how games have been understood over the years. The article frames itself as a tool that game scholars can use in order to better position themselves in terms of their fundamental understanding of what a ‘game’ is, and consequently also, how games and play should be properly studied.

In the second of the articles Sebastian Deterding examines the “pyrrhic victory” of game studies as an interdiscipline. By drawing on existing scientometric data and game studies editorials, handbooks and introductions the paper proposes that rather than establishing itself as a broad interdiscipline of digital game research, ‘game studies’ is turning into an increasingly narrow cultural studies multidiscipline. The article also suggests that game scholars from such established disciplines like human-computer interaction and communication research these days often prefer their own disciplinary publishing venues. Finally, the article discusses how design orientation could importantly help to develop and secure the future of interdisciplinary game research.

In ‘How to Present the History of Digital Games: Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical and Pathological Approaches’ Jaakko Suominen examines the different approaches of presenting the history of digital games. Through analysing both academic and popular gaming histories, Suominen identifies four separate genres: enthusiast, emancipatory, genealogical and pathological histories. The approaches importantly reflect the different notions of what is central in the history of digital games and to whom these histories is primarily targeted. Finally, the paper shows how the categories help us discuss some of the key questions associated with the historiography of digital games.

Samuel Coavoux, Vinciane Zabban and Manuel Boutet turn the focus to the games studied by game scholars in their article ‘What We Know about Games. A Scientometric Approach to

Game Studies in the 2000s'. Drawing on a sociology of science framework and scientometric and lexicometric tools, the article provides a topic model analysis on the corpus of close to 900 articles from the key game studies venues. The analysis suggests that scholars have been studying only a limited set of game genres. In order to explain why scholars focus on particular games the paper introduces and tests the hypotheses of path dependence and trading zone.

In 'What Is It Like to Be A Player? The Qualia Revolution in Game Studies' Ivan Mosca discusses the integration of social ontology into the research of games. According to Mosca, this field of philosophy that focuses on social facts can help games scholarship move towards player analysis without leaving an object-oriented approach. The paper further suggests that game research still often suffers from 'rule reductionism' and discusses how social ontology can help to repair this shortcoming.

The last contribution in this thematic issues, by Bart Simon, introduces an unserious epistemology for the study and design of games. This provocative piece calls for ways of taking the unseriousness of games seriously. In other words, by highlighting the importance of unseriousness in a contemporary world often defined by the grave seriousness of life this article provides basis for new kinds of theorizations of gameplay as a socio-cultural activity.

Finally, we want to thank the authors, reviewers, as well as all speakers and participants in the original "Critical Evaluation of Game Studies" seminar for creating the fruitful framework for open dialogue, which has made this special issue possible. If we want to properly understand both elements that unite game scholars, as well as the differences in our foci and approaches, there is continual need for work that attempts to reflect and evaluate at more general perspective the direction of our research field. This is where this issue hopes to contribute into, while we also wish for more future work to emerge that will take these meta-analytical approaches even further.

## **Literature**

Melcer, E., Nguyen, T. H. D., Chen, Z., Canossa, A., El-Nasr, M. S., & Isbister, K. (2015). Games Research Today: Analyzing the Academic Landscape 2000-2014. Foundations of Digital Games 2015.

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